2007

Craft + idea = new vIews [Exhibition Catalogue]

Edited by: Barros, Maureen Anne Hubbard and Yung, Lily

Craft + Idea = new views

Volume 2

Edited by
Lily Yung and
Anne Barros

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edited by Lily Yung and Anne Barros

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ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

PREFACE

This volume collects a diversity of craft writing within the past two years. There are essays on two exhibitions, an interview with a gallery owner, and finally excerpts from four lectures. Lise Downe's essay on the ***Museum of Vivienne Jones and Ken Nicol*** won her the Ontario Crafts Council Critical Writing award for her insights into "accumulation, variation and transformation." Ken Vickerson compared 1001 rings of five very different makers curated by Lily Yung and inspired by an Onno Boekhoudt workshop project. To understand the genesis of David Kaye's new gallery in Toronto, Barbara Isherwood interviewed Kaye about selling "objects and painting." Finally, in celebration of 2007 as the Year of Craft in Canada, ***new*** gallery and the **new vlews** collective sponsored a series of four lectures on craft. Gordon Thompson talked about craft theory. Michael Prokopow gave his thoughts on the status of craft after modernism. Melanie Egan told of the many aspects to be considered in curating craft exhibitions and Paul McClure amused us with analogies between the craft teacher and a ***wolpertinger***.

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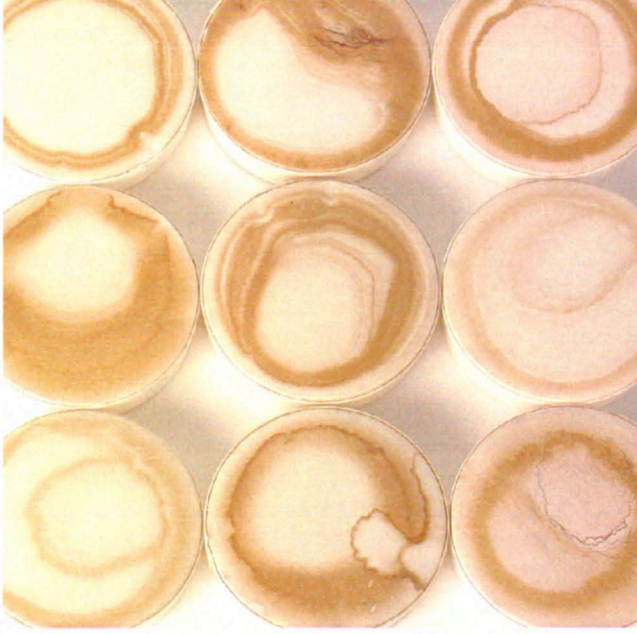
October 25 – November 12

OPENING RECEPTION

Thursday | October 26
5:30 to 8:00 pm



MOVAK

Museum of Vivienne Jones and Ken Nicol

***new* gallery**
906 Queen Street West
Toronto, Ontario M6J 1G6
tel. 416-588-1200 www.new-gallery.ca

gallery hours
Wednesday to Sunday, 1 to 6 pm

COVER IMAGES
TOP: Ken Nicol, *Daily Fossils*
paper coffee cups, 2006
BOTTOM: Vivienne Jones, *Invert*
resin, steel, 2006

MOVAK

Museum of Vivienne Jones and Ken Nicol

by Lise Downe

IN *MOVAK* (Museum of Vivienne Jones and Ken Nicol), two Toronto-based artists express their idiosyncratic sensibilities through the manipulation of artifacts. Natural and cultural "debris" inspire unusual reconfigurations, enabling us to experience objects anew. Theirs is a process of reclamation, not only of materials, but of the act of making — an antidote to our cluttered world of mass-produced objects.

For many years Jones has used the technique of collage when designing jewellery, and she continues to explore its creative potential in her recent constructions of small-scale sculpture. Like Hans Arp and Joseph Cornell, Jones uses collage to undermine preconceived notions of beauty and perception so that new forms may emerge.

Jones finds meaning in discarded or lost objects; her impulse is to "rescue" them. In *Invert*, the germinal form is an old glass bottle, a "husk." Its surface scratches suggest a history of having been handled over a long period of time. Jones retrieved it from obscurity, revivifying it in what initially appears to be a replica. But appearances can be deceiving. The new bottle is not a vessel, but a solid translucent acrylic object in the form of the original bottle. Its ethereal quality is further enhanced by tiny pieces of found fragments that are suspended inside. Jones describes the new bottle as a "memory of what was there." The original is a container; the new object is what is contained; and their correspondence generates a paradoxical dynamic of either/or while being both at the same time.

The ethereal qualities of resin are further explored in sculptures included in the *Biomorphic Form Series*. With much of her three-dimensional work, and reminiscent of the preliminary stages of her jewellery making, Jones develops her ideas through loose, immediate drawings which are then translated into carved wax for casting. She works intuitively, and the resulting forms have an aura of mystery.

For pieces such as the rusted steel wire basket and its smaller interpretation — made in silver and worn as a brooch — Jones uses wire to draw in space, evoking the memory or possibility of something solid. Her recent constructions, using found materials and/or resin, wax, wooden shoe heels, and buttons, are deliberate attempts to "get away from preciousness" and enlarge her vocabulary of forms.

Ken Nicol also develops his ideas through drawing and the making of objects. Where Jones's predilection is for both organic and manmade forms, Nicol is particularly fascinated with the mundane in his urban environment.

In *Daily Fossils*, the bottoms of used paper coffee cups are displayed on the wall in a grid. Initially, the piece is seen as an integrated whole. On closer

examination, its individual components become evident. The coffee stains on each cup bottom appear to be similar but are, in fact, quite distinct. How do we read these stains? As Nicol has explained, by "pulling these marks out of the trash," he is gently urging us to see "the hidden beauty that's right before our eyes."

Flogging a Dead Horse II is a large drawing which, from a distance, appears as an undefined field. As the viewer approaches the composition becomes clear. It is a dense accumulation of clustered lines, each group comprised of four verticals cut across with one diagonal line — a simplified counting notation for groups of five. From top to bottom, the drawing's dark tone gradually fades to the white of the paper, a consequence of the pen running out of ink. Nicol refers to the lines as "hatch marks," a term which directly references a drawing technique. But why counting? And what is being counted?

Vivienne Jones, *Basket*, sterling silver, 2006

In Nicol's work we experience something reminiscent of an early Chinese concept of numbers, whereby the *quality* of a thing is revealed, rather than its *quantity*. This is an important distinction. The quote by artist Carl Andre on Nicol's studio wall provides a deeper understanding: "If a thing is worth doing once, it's worth doing again."

A field of repetition becomes a field of change. In Gertrude Stein's writing and in the musical compositions of Steve Reich we encounter a similar phenomenon of "... endless differences amid recurring sameness."[1]

Nicol's display of the pen used for the drawing contributes to the "museum aspect" of his work. The drawing is the artifact of his activity; the pen is the artifact he used.

Accumulation. Variation. Transformation.

These are the qualities that Jones and Nicol present in *MOVAK*. They challenge us to reflect on how the apparently inconsequential materials and activities of our daily lives have the potential to deliver us from the mundane to a place of wonder.

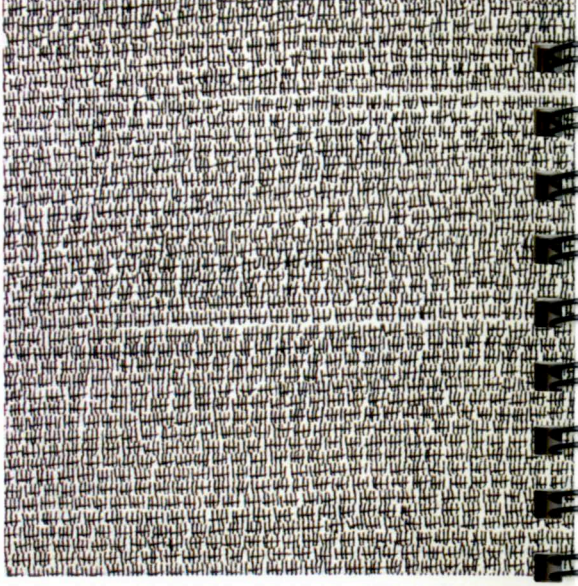
LISE DOWNE is an artist and writer who lives in Toronto.

K. NICOL studied at several institutions before giving up on any kind of diploma. He currently works in a studio in Toronto where he surrounds himself with old typewriters, clocks and broken things. He makes art.

Ken Nicol 416-214-9572
evilkenicol@hotmail.com

Originally from Britain, **VIVIENNE JONES** is a graduate from The Birmingham School of Jewellery. She maintains a studio practice in Toronto working in both traditional and non-traditional materials.

Vivienne Jones 416-531-4472
www.viviennejones.com
viviennej@rogers.com



Ken Nicol, *Flogging a Dead Horse II*, paper, ink, 2006

Because there is very little critical writing on contemporary Canadian crafts, Anne Barros and Lily Yung felt the urgent need for craft artists themselves to take action and inform the viewing public that there are ideas behind the materials in craft practices. We hope that **new vIews** will make critics reflect on their indifference to crafts, while at the same time provide interested writers an opportunity to have their views published. In so doing, it is anticipated that the much needed writing on crafts will begin to happen. Aside from serving as a record for future reference, such documentation will help contemporary Canadian craft artists to define their place in the history and tradition of craft making.

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editing Lily Yung and Anne Barros
design Kathe Gray/electric pear & Melissa Kaita
photos Sophie Bouy

40 YEARS + 40 ANS
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Vivienne and the **newvIews** collective gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the Ontario Arts Council.

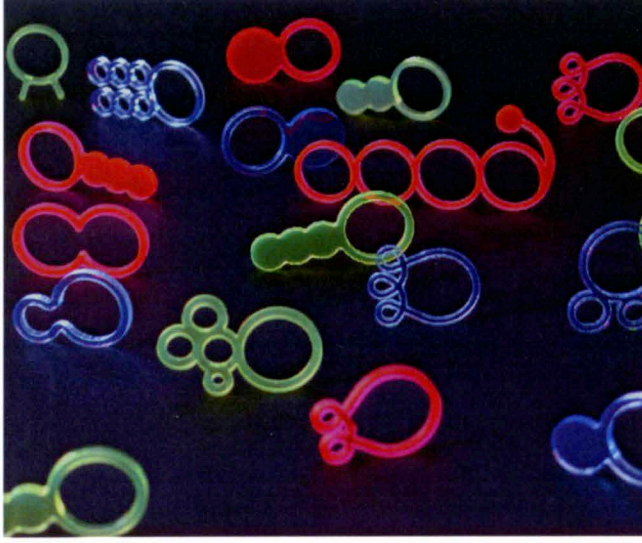
ENDNOTES

1 Richard Kostelanetz, *The Yale Gertrude Stein* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1980), Introduction.

November 15 to
December 3, 2006

OPENING RECEPTION

Thursday | November 16
5:00 to 8:00 pm



1001 rings

Kai Chan, Lise Downe, Gina Fafard,Tiana Roebuck, Lily Yung

***new* gallery**
906 Queen Street West
Toronto, Ontario M6J 1G6
tel. 416-588-1200 www.new-gallery.ca

gallery hours
Wednesday to Sunday, 1 to 6 pm

COVER IMAGES
TOP: rings by Lily Yung
BOTTOM: ring by Lise Downe

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Kai Chan, Lise Downe, Gina Fafard, Tiana Roebuck, Lily Yung

1001 rings

by Ken Vickerson

1001 RINGS, WILL YOU COUNT THEM? Someone will...don't distract them...they're on a mission. 1, 2, 3, 4....

Though the origins of the ring are lost to us because early examples were likely made of perishable materials, evidence from the Paleolithic period suggests that our ancestors were concerned with personal adornment. "This most universal and fundamental need of human beings could be likened to a desire to impose order on nature or to stand out in a crowd."[1] Encirclement itself has many symbolic meanings: eternity, continuity, the sun, the soul, completeness, enclosure, boundary, fidelity, perfection, life cycles...the list goes on, especially when associated with specific religions or cultures.

The inspiration for this project came from the fertile mind of Onno Boekhoudt. Onno, a highly respected jeweller and teacher from the Netherlands, visited Canada regularly and had a great influence on the people who met him. Among them was Lily Yung, the instigator of this project. One of Onno's workshop themes was "101 Rings." As you might expect, the participants were to make 101 rings over the course of two days. This proved to be a liberating experience for some as they had an opportunity to let their creativity run riot. Unfettered, the participants dredged unrealized ideas from memory banks and manifested concepts that may have been gestating for years. For all, it was time to think quickly. Onno understood that these forces combined to nurture vitally original work. With 1001 rings one might expect a multiplicity of approaches, room for experimentation, mass production and sketches for more complete work. These five artists have marched to those boundaries and beyond.

rings by Tiana Roebuck

Lily Yung has continued with digital design and fabrication systems explored in her exhibition, ***Prototyping***, presented last fall. Lily has taken a production approach for her rings which are rendered in plastics, silicone rubber and stainless steel. I was struck then, as I am now, by the juxtaposition of the crisp digital design with the almost natural marks left by the machining processes. A group of brightly coloured acrylic rings, ordered like some alien alphabet, are energized by the reflections of the laser cut edges. When arranged on a surface bathed in light they produce an aura which further enhances this perception. Her shells, like rings made by stereolithography, have the texture of natural formations. These marks are similar to process marks left by the hand...or a ghost in the machine.

An inveterate experimenter, Kai Chan's rings demonstrate a progression of ideas worked through various series. Made from materials that have lived previous lives, these works speak to me of the difference in the assigned value of materials for the maker and the viewer. Recycled material carries a history and its associated significance. In the rings made of progressive sizes of buttons stacked like Babylonian towers, each button has a unique history to be contemplated. Kai's sense of humour is evident in works such as the one made of a bit of wood, a rubber hose, a button and some twisted wire, and another made from a large red funnel with a painted wooden egg; both have the power to provoke a broad smile. Though Kai is adamant that his rings must be wearable, I believe they are meant for occasional wear as some would prove challenging to have on in certain situations.

rings by Gina Fafard

Found objects are also a source of inspiration for Lise Downe. Plant stems are delicately stitched together to form an ephemeral construction for one or more fingers. In another work the fossilized sections of crinoids (ancient sea animals) are strung together to form an equally fragile ring. Either could be a good departure point for the contemplation of the transitory nature of life. "It has been an opportunity to look at the ring in the simplest of terms...the little Dutch boy's finger stuck in the dike, for example. One could argue that the dike is a ring. Unwieldy and inhibiting any possibility of being worn elsewhere, but a ring nonetheless."[2]

Tiana Roebuck chooses to interpret the ring in the broader context of encirclement, "as a shape-not object."[3] Tiana's production is dedicated to her two grandmothers, both seasoned hand workers and inspirations for her as a child.

Influenced by her paternal grandmother's intricately cut paper dolls, Tiana explores their linear geometry in works of her own. Her maternal grandmother is acknowledged in works that refer to classic cross stitch patterns. Nostalgia, tribute and an interest in traditional craft practice are the points of convergence for these works.

Concern for resources, the inherent toxic effects of conventional jewellery practices and an absence of electricity have led Gina Fafard to rediscover crochet, a skill developed in childhood. Her rings convey a truth to materials, her past and herself.

Onno Boekhoudt died in a tragic automobile accident in October of 2002, taking a profoundly potent influence from the craft community. For me, this exhibition serves as fitting memorial to his life and work.

KEN VICKERSON is an Associate Professor at the Ontario College of Art and Design.

KAI CHAN is the recipient of Jean A. Chalmers National Crafts Award (1998) and the Saidye Bronfman for Excellence in the Fine Crafts (2002).

LISE DOWNE is an artist and writer who lives and works in Toronto.

GINA FAFARD is a NSCAD graduate jeweller who is currently pursuing her interests in sustainable construction.

TIANA ROEBUCK has a BFA in Jewellery and Metalsmithing from NSCAD and is currently in her third year as a Metal Studio resident at Harbourfront Centre.

LILY YUNG is a jeweller of non-precious material currently using computer aided design and manufacturing technologies.

rings by Kai Chan

Because there is very little critical writing on contemporary Canadian crafts, Anne Barros and Lily Yung felt the urgent need for craft artists themselves to take action and inform the viewing public that there are ideas behind the materials in craft practices. We hope that **new views** will make critics reflect on their indifference to crafts, while at the same time provide interested writers an opportunity to have their views published. In so doing, it is anticipated that the much needed writing on crafts will begin to happen. Aside from serving as a record for future reference, such documentation will help contemporary Canadian craft artists to define their place in the history and tradition of craft making.

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editing Lily Yung and Anne Barros
design Kathe Gray/electric pear & Melissa Kaita
photos Lily's rings by Sophie Bouy

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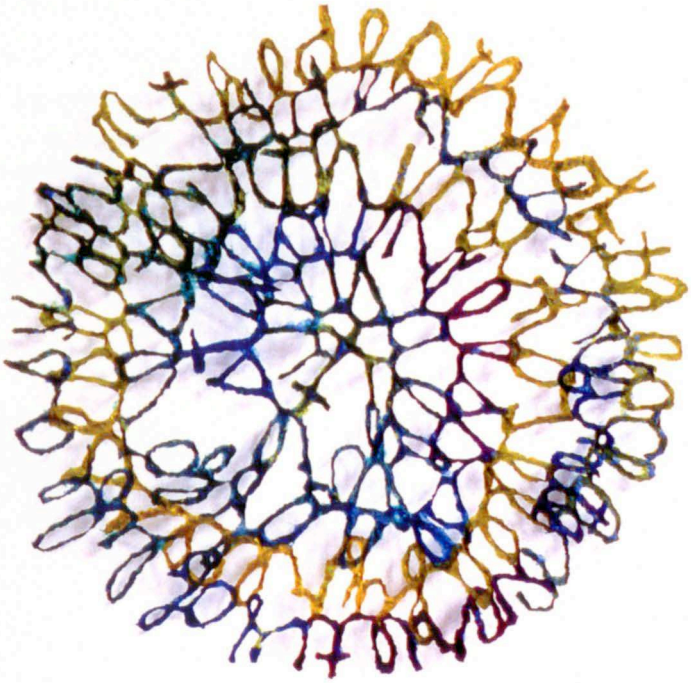
Tiana and the **newvlews** collective wish to acknowledge the support of the Ontario Arts Council.

Lily and Kai wish to acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts.

ENDNOTES

[1] "The Ring-Design Past and Present," Sylvie Lambert
[2] Artist Statement, Lise Downe, 2006
[3] Correspondence, Tiana Roebuck, 2006



David Kaye

An Artful Adventure

david kaye gallery
1092 Queen Street West (entrance on Dovercourt)
Toronto, Ontario M6J 1H9
tel. 416-532-9075
info@davidkayegallery.com
www.davidkayegallery.com

gallery hours
Monday, Tuesday: by appointment
Wednesday, Thursday, Friday: 11 – 7 pm
Saturday, Sunday: 11 – 6 pm

COVER IMAGE
Susan Warner Keene, Canopy #3, 2004, handmade flax paper, 27 in. (dia.)

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David Kaye
An Artful Adventure

Interviewed by Barbara Isherwood, September 2006

DAVID KAYE STARTED HIS CAREER AS A textile artist, then began working in 1984 at Prime Gallery, a contemporary craft gallery in Toronto. He went to work at Bau-Xi Gallery in November of 2002, and then opened the David Kaye Gallery at 1092 Queen West (at Dovercourt) in April of 2006.

What is the genesis of this venture?

I'd been encouraged by many friends to start my own gallery. When I was at Bau-Xi I missed that hands-on aspect to objects, touch is part of understanding, appreciating and accepting works. When I got wind of this space, it seemed like it had the best potential. There is a lot of activity in this area with things going on at the Gladstone, the Drake, and various festivals. *new* gallery and the Crafts Council are here.

Are there differences between selling fine craft and other kinds of art?

I think the art/craft issue is so tiring. When people ask what I show, I say, "objects and painting." I've had a lot of good comments on the mix. It's about trying to make people comfortable living with sculptural kinds of objects. They can be mixed in with what you live with. It doesn't have to be scary. You're trying to educate people, or allay their fears. I don't think my role is to talk somebody into buying something. It's all about building confidence. If you like it and you want to have it out on display, go for it.

In both worlds, there's a really small group of hardcore collectors, people who build their collections and they're very aware of what they have and what gaps they need to fill. We certainly want more people like that. Those people are special and need to be nurtured.

What are the challenges to selling this kind of work?

Just making sure people can give it space. For example, with the Susan Collett objects, one has gone to a private individual who is going to live with it. I think she was afraid at first. She had a spot for it, then I suggested another spot, then she could see how it could be incorporated into how she was living in her room. Again it goes back to confidence. Not everything should be destined for a museum. Live with a Harlan House bowl as a salad bowl, use it. Kai Chan is a good example, he has marvelous dishes, Walter Ostrom, Dale Pereira. So when you go to dinner, we always kid him, can I have the plate after dinner? It's wonderful to live with these objects. It adds a richness to your life.

I gather that most of the artists you've taken on are people you've known for years.

Yes, there's quite a history. There are a few exceptions. Amanda Clyne approached me. She's new from OCAD. I liked how she presented herself. I have to be excited about the work, to want to have it here, to be able to talk about it and encourage someone to make that leap.

Will you take on more artists?

A few more. A lot of the artists have come with exhibition agendas, so my schedule is filling in — Jim Thomson, Marc Egan, Kai Chan, Dorothy Caldwell, Susan Warner Keene, and Harlan House.

Gallery window with Susan Collett ceramics (left) and Edda Dolcetti drawing (right)

Visiting artists, after this three-year hiatus from Prime, it was exciting looking at the work of Ken Nicol and Lynne McIvride Evans. I admire the intensity and the amount of work that goes into making it look effortless. Thank goodness we have people who do that, expend all their energies, be as quirky as hell.

What are your plans for marketing the gallery?

Just being part of the events that happen in this strip brings people in. During the summer I would stay open way late at night to get people who are out for an evening. I meet the neighbourhood people, and people who see the gallery when it is closed. I think that's important, to be accessible.

I'm trying to develop a web site. I'd like to be in a position to do the art fairs. SOFA Chicago would be ideal because of the scale. It's so big, it's mid-country so you get both coasts attending. It's something to aspire to.

What are your thoughts about the future?

I have to repeat to myself that you just don't know what's going to happen. Yesterday I was finalizing this Susan Warner Keene sale to a corporation, which happened through an art consultant. It's a difficult piece and I'm excited that they're taking on this challenge. I'm encouraged by that. You just never know who is going to be interested in something. I had someone on the phone yesterday, asking who is Tery Pellettier. They had walked by early in the morning and seen the painting in the window. They're going to come back on the weekend. You just have to live optimistically.

BARBARA ISHERWOOD has an MA in Art History from the University of Toronto. She was the 2005 recipient of the Ontario Craft Council's Critical Craft Writing Award.

DAVID KAYE

Ontario College of Art, A.O.C.A., 1972 (Chalmers Scholarship and the Lieutenant-Governor's Medal)
University of Guelph, B.A., 1978
Cranbrook Academy of Art, M.F.A., 1980

Selected Collections:
The Library and Gallery, Cambridge.
The Canada Council Art Bank (2 Works), Ottawa.
The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto.
Department of External Affairs, Ottawa.
Massey Foundation Collection, Ottawa.

Marc Egan, Construction Series, 2005, earthenware, 5.5 in. (h.)

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Excerpt from
Talk Craft 1
February 18, 2007
new gallery

Craft's Intellectual Culture

by Gordon Thompson

"TIRED OF THEORY? ...TRY METALSMITHING!" This was the title line on an email I received just as I was starting to think about this talk. It was a message circulated on the graduate student list serve of the department in which I now study, in an attempt to solicit brain weary graduate students to register in a metalsmithing class offered at the Harbourfront Craft studios. The title struck me because of the way it emphasized the disjunction between the idea of theory and the practice of craft. There is nothing uncommon in this kind of opposition, but here craft was being suggested as a very practical antidote to theory, or as a vacation from thought. The message conveyed was: use your hands and let your brain take a break. It was a savvy bit of advertising that played

on a separation that is already well established in the popular mind. The ad could have said: "tired of essay writing," or "tired of archival research," or reading, or any number of things that reflect the labour of graduate students, but none of these would have conveyed the sense of poetic asymmetry that was caught by this tag line. In the public imagination, the practice of theory and the practice of a craft do indeed seem to be antithetical.

I'm starting with this example because, in my opinion, the fact that many of us continue to dissociate these terms (craft and theory) so readily and so effectively has much to do with the fact that, at some level, we lack the tools to think deeply about craft's thoughtfulness. We're not skilled at speaking about how the objects we make become evidence of "a mind at work in the world." [1]

At the same time, there are signs that contemporary craft theory and criticism is on the rise. Here we are celebrating "Craft Year 2007," a nation-wide series of events that are as dedicated to cultivating craft's idea-culture, to encouraging the range of discourses that surround craft practices, as they are to the promotion of craft practices themselves. There is an appetite for an intellectual culture to engage and supplement craft practice. It is by no means a universal appetite, but it seems to me to be growing. Or at least it is learning how to network. Witness the growing number of conferences that are becoming increasingly international in scale and the scheduled launch in 2008 of the Journal of Modern Craft which promises "the first peer-reviewed academic journal to provide an interdisciplinary and international forum for the rigorous analysis of craft."

But even if craft's intellectual culture seems poised to take off, it still has the appearance of being something in its infancy. One still gets the feeling that a strong intellectual culture is something that lies in craft's future rather than in its present or past. Craft theory in particular, feels like something that's ***about to happen.***

But, of course there is something rather strange in this, given the fact that craft as most of us know it today, was born of intellectual culture; it emerged out of the social, political, and philosophical thought of the arts and crafts movement and other social and aesthetic debates that animated Britain and Continental Europe in the second half of the 19th century. Bruce Metcalf argues that craft objects in the wake of the Arts and Crafts movement were a new phenomenon in the world. "First of all," he writes, "they were theorized [objects]. They were both the product and subject of discourse." [2]

In addition to Ruskin and Morris, other canonical figures of art history, theory and criticism like Gottfried Semper and Alois Riegl laid foundations for craft theory that we should still be mining and debating. Academic interest in these two figures in particular has been on the rise. New major English translations and new critical monographs have appeared on both in the last couple of years and many theorists are revisiting them.

If the craft object after William Morris is a new phenomenon — as

Metcalf argues, contemporary craft objects are distinct but not disassociated from craft objects of the distant past. Semper and Riegl's work on historical "crafts," ceramics and textiles in particular, generates a wealth of useful concepts for thinking about crafts or the useful and decorative arts both ancient and modern.

Given the richness of craft's intellectual history, I'm surprised by the way craft's desire for theory or criticism is repeatedly assumed to be an imported rather than a native desire. It is often implied that craft's move towards critical and theoretical discourse is a consequence of its move towards the fine art model or evidence of its longing for fine art status. For example, the ceramist Paul Mathieu, in an attempt to bring a short essay by French theorist Michel Foucault to bear on a discussion of "the space of pottery" justified his efforts by claiming the importance of meeting art criticism on its own terms. He writes: "What is a potter doing meddling with theory and ideas, anyway? I believe it is essential to confront the art world in the language it speaks, to address the problem on *its* territory." [3]

Mathieu was attempting to differentiate craft theory from art theory, rather than assimilate to it; he was trying to oppose the volumetric space of pottery to the mass oriented space of sculpture. Yet the orientation of craft's intellectual culture as an answer to, if not an aspiration towards art's own intellectual culture, is interesting and a little troubling. The suggestion that art somehow has possession of the territory of theory seems very problematic to me.

Craft's currently complicated relation to theory, of course, has a lot to do with the contemporary structure of university-based craft education. While I reject the idea that art departments "own" theory, it is nonetheless the case that they have long been holding the keys to theory curriculum and craft programs have, in general, been subordinated to the theoretical agenda of art departments. The consequences of this are significant. When Ron Shuebrook, former president of the Ontario College of Art and Design, surveyed the state of craft theory in Canadian educational institutions at the "Exploring Contemporary Craft" conference at Harbourfront, he noted: "As far as I have been able to discover, no formal courses devoted to craft theory currently exist in [the] professional art colleges." He continued to say that: "One...notes [the] state of affairs with some sense of dismay, but, at the same time, with an intense awareness of the wonderful, transformative work to be done." [4]

GORDON THOMPSON works at the Ontario College of Art and Design. He is a technician in the ceramics studio and has taught courses in ceramics and in the general design stream. He is a PhD candidate in the department of Communication and Culture at York University, with a research interest in craft and cultural theory.

It is a mistake to assume that craft's interest in theory is purely or recently an artifact of art colleges. While craft's aspirations for an intellectual culture that treats its work with seriousness do not originate in the university, nevertheless, the university does have an important role to play in fostering a vibrant intellectual culture for craft.

[1] Henry Glassie, *Material Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.

[2] Bruce Metcalf. "Contemporary Craft: A Brief Overview," in *Exploring Contemporary Craft: History, Theory and Critical Writing*. Toronto: Coach House Books and Harbourfront Centre, 2002:15.

[3] Paul Mathieu. "The Space of Pottery: An Investigation of the Nature of Craft," in *Making and Metaphor: A Discussion of Meaning in Contemporary Craft*. Ed. Gloria A. Hickey. Hull: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1994:28.

[4] Ron Shuebrook. "Collective Memory, Craft History and Theory: A Canadian Perspective," in *Exploring Contemporary Craft: History, Theory and Critical Writing*. Toronto: Coach House Books and Harbourfront Centre, 2002:71.

craft 2007 YEAR
ANNÉE DES métiers d'art

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Chung-Im Kim
Melinda Mayhall

new gallery
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
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editing Lily Yung and Anne Barros
author photo Nadya Burton
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"Hand to Mouth" — Some Critical And Personal Thoughts on Craft and Making in Contemporary Society

by Michael Prokopow

I HAVE BEEN TOLD that I possess a conflicted relationship with craft. I would like to substitute "complicated" for "conflicted" because the latter sounds too adversarial and, while I do not find all craft equally appealing or understandable, there are practices across periods of making that I hold in very high regard, for example the jewelry of Betty Cooke, Ed Weiner and Art Smith; the weavings of Anni Albers; and the pottery of Erica and Kjeld Deichmann. Thus, while "conflicted" may be more accurate in describing my critical stance towards some aspects of craft, this discussion represents long-standing thoughts about the status and meaning of craft in the wake of what I shall call modernization.

My views on craft and my interest in the status of craft — aesthetic,

economic, and social — are partly the result of several early experiences around "makers" and "making." I recall my Welsh grandmother and her knitting of squares of all colors for making blankets. To me, her knitting operated as a type of contemplative recreation. My other vivid memory of craft comes from high school where the boys were required to make a small garden spade out of cold steel, but the pedagogical purpose of having students make something by hand was lost on me.

Even as a young person, I had a sense of how handmade things operated as continuations from a largely eclipsed past. In retrospect, these early experiences helped me construct a rather standoffish, even unfavorable opinion of craft. By the time I got to university and started to study history and material culture, my relationship (maybe uneasiness) with craft and its place in the modern world was already pretty much established. Mindful of the relationship in history between texts (including actions) and contexts, craft seemed to defy time and to exist between the category of the useable thing and the art piece. Constituting the preservation or retention of historic practices and sensibilities, craft often seemed to be a practice out of time. I was always suspicious of its motives, wary of what I saw as its provincialism and its earnestness.

My appraisal of craft is tied to my understanding of economic history, the history of things and the timelines of art and technology. I see handmade objects in temporal contexts of time as they relate to the economic and social transformations wrought by industrialization. And these transformations were no more earth shattering than in Britain in the 1730s and 1740s where the rationalization of batch work, the rise in the output of cottage industries and the mechanization of production heralded radical changes to the way people worked and lived. Think of Josiah Wedgwood's commercialization of the pottery industry or the mass production of razor blades by Wilkinson. In each case, reforms in production for mass consumption challenged the logic of handmade things. While systems of elite patronage were maintained with artisans making objects of rarity and variety, the practices that had previously been responsible for the making of most goods gave way to a model that turned on ideas of progress. The skills of the craftsperson were increasingly supplanted or pushed to the economic and geographic margins of modernizing society. Craft became a type of embodiment of the rural, the traditional, and to the minds of some, the ***retardaire***.

Given that all human-made things operate as evidence, craft has something important to say about the society in which it is made and used. Because craft has persisted in spite of the pressures of economic modernization, it would seem that the handmade thing represents more than simply its function or material. Rather, craft could be seen as always constituting a type of anti-modernist impulse, even though craft has moved through the history of style and stylistic change.

It is arguable that what Hans Beltung and Arthur Danto have described

as the "end of art" has irrevocably taken hold and must therefore be seen as relevant to a discussion of contemporary craft production as well. The end of modernity has contributed to an artistic/creative culture concerned primarily with inserting the uncensored self openly and actively in the creative process. Given that the condition of post-modernity is all encompassing, it would make sense that all other creative endeavors — including craft — would similarly be marked by an absence of any dominant practice, an eclecticism of expression, form and intention, and the open valorization of the artist's feelings as the foundation of creative thought and making. From the non-functional glass teapots of Richard Marquis to Sam Maloof's art furniture to art jewelry to art pottery to fabric art, contemporary craft presents a challenge to the student of material culture because the eclectic diversity of practice and form is extremely difficult to assess and classify. This is not to say that there are not patterns and movement of practice within contemporary craft — exploration of new materials, regional trends and schools of practice, lineages of teachers and students, clusters of motifs and patterns and so on — but that there is no dominating trope of practice across media.

Much of post-modern craft relies on historicism for inspiration. The results are objects that are new and anachronistic or embody a pervasive nostalgia for an imagined and largely romanticized past. Without a hierarchy that separated art from decorative arts and decorative arts from utilitarian things, many makers have sought to have their work accorded the status of art. The nonfunctional craft object seems oxymoronic since the historical basis of craft was the making of useful and luxury things. There exists across the range of craft production a cult of the sentimental and the tender. If modernism was dominating and alienating because of its requirements of fealty, post modernity with its focus on affect and feeling suffered volumes in the opposite direction, meaning it lacked purpose, direction and history; save for historical references and imagery that it so gleefully poached. Indeed, post-modernity's aesthetic temperament (and this would include the present return in many ways to what I see as hyper-modernism) relied solely on the decontextualized sampling of form and decorative content. The twin creative fonts of "the past" and "the self" fostered an unruly world of artistic practices.

And again, the idea of the end of art is useful. The adage of "Art is what

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the artist says it is" — radical at the time it was uttered, gave way under post-modernity to the notion that every one can be an artist and while training and talent do distinguish professionals from dilettantes, a catholicism of expression remains the common fact of contemporary cultural production. Thus I see the relationship between modernity, post-modernity and craft production as a highly complicated one. Modernity rendered the handmade thing increasingly obsolete and post-modernity legitimated the romantic simulacra and false consciousness.

My central concern about the status of contemporary craft turns on the question of intent. And while I know that this statement will likely elicit defenses of practice and oeuvre, I still maintain that much contemporary craft may be seen as tangible legacies of modernity's failures to successfully substitute traditional identity for an equally meaningful equivalent. For while making a thing by hand — whether out of wood, or clay or glass — is an act of humanity and poetry, (as David Pye and Peter Dormer have explained) and an act that spoke to time and place, it would seem that much contemporary craft is looking for a vocabulary of substance and significance. The contemporary handmade thing needs to advance the conversation about materiality and form and avoid mourning a lost past and its sentimental pitfalls.

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Curating Craft – Making Objects is Difficult and I Care About That!

by Melanie Egan

AS HEAD OF THE CRAFT DEPARTMENT at Harbourfront Centre, I have been curator of a number of solo and group exhibitions. However, when asked recently (by a curator I respect) whether I consider myself a curator, the answer is "sometimes."

I didn't train as a curator. I studied Jewellery Arts at George Brown College in the early 1980s, then ran my own business for a number of years. It wasn't until I began working for Harbourfront Centre that I had the opportunity to curate exhibitions.

The word "curator" is derived from the Latin *curare*, which means "to take care of; to oversee." But the role of an exhibition curator is also to conserve and interpret objects, organize and develop thematic exhibitions

and displays, and bring specialized knowledge to bear. Curators are essentially advocates for a particular practice, artist, culture or topic, and work either alone or with others to bring these aspects to the public.

One of the defining moments for me with respect to understanding contemporary craft occurred while I was studying jewellery. Influenced by the ideas and attitudes of the New Jewellery movement, I was exposed to work by Canadians, Europeans (most notably Dutch and German) and Americans and my view of jewellery was altered. The time was heady with debate and discussion. The words "contemporary craft," however, didn't enter my lexicon until much later. At school, none of my instructors ever used the word "craft" in reference to what I was making. It was while working in the Metal Studio at Harbourfront Centre that I started to think about craft. I came to understand the diversity and issues it encompassed and saw parallels within my own particular world of contemporary jewellery practice.

As a curator of craft, it's important to define what you mean by "craft." American metalsmith/jeweller and writer Bruce Metcalf suggests that "'craft' is a tricky word, with no precise definition." He goes on to say that "craft" is a cultural construct, rather than an empirical fact, and "parallel to Arthur Danto's idea of the artworld, I'll also say that there is a craftworld, and that the institutions of the craftworld effectively get to decide what the word means."[1]

In a similar vein, Paul Greenhalgh, Director and President of the Corcoran Gallery of Art and Corcoran College of Art and Design, and former President of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University (NSCAD), asserts: "Craft has always been a supremely messy word. . . . In late modern culture, the crafts are a consortium of genres in the visual arts: genres that make sense collectively because for artistic, economic and institutional reasons, they have been deliberately placed together. . . . They have no intrinsic cohesion; they have no ***a priori*** relationship that makes them a permanently peculiar or special gathering; there could be fewer or more of them; they are together now, as we move into the next century, because the complex forces that brought them together, despite shifts in circumstance, hold them in proximity. The proximity is not stable and is certainly in a process of change. Nevertheless they are in the consortium still."[2]

I like the notion of craft as "tricky" and "supremely messy." And it is Metcalf's suggestion that "the institutions of the craftworld effectively get to decide what the word means" which serves me best as a curator because I work for just such an institution.

As a curator, I am most interested in educating and providing information about contemporary craft, while dispelling preconceived notions. There are a number of ideas or considerations which might lead to an exhibition. For example:

- Hybrid work which straddles the worlds of art and craft comfortably, such as the work of glass artist Brad Copping who produces pieces that are both sculptural and functional.
- Collaborative projects which involve cooperation between craftspeople and other artists or disciplines.
- Functionality. The impetus for ***Guilty Pleasures*** was a photograph of an

eighteenth-century Wedgwood "radish dish." I was struck by the object's specificity, which led me to wonder what an object made for a guilty pleasure might look like. The result was an exhibition in 2005 featuring craftspeople who make functional ceramic pieces.

• Decoration. The 2005 solo exhibition ***Equivocal Ceramic*** showcased work by ceramist Marc Egan and explored the relationship between richly decorated surfaces and complex sculptural forms.

• Narration. I had been looking at images of Classical Greek pottery that used narrative to relate heroic myths, and at African-American slave quilts which contained secret codes, messages and symbols pointing the way to the Underground Railroad. The resulting 2006 exhibition, ***Tell***, featured craftspeople whose work has a strong narrative element.

When putting together an exhibition, how the work is viewed is an important consideration. For example, jewellery presents specific challenges related to scale and perception. Jewellery says one thing on the body, and something quite different in a gallery setting. Scale alone gives a curator much to think about: the objects themselves are small, but are displayed on the body, which is larger, and sometimes within a gallery, which is larger still. A curator is continuously confronted with space issues which often require creative solutions. In the 2003 exhibition, ***Elements***, featuring the work of jeweller, Van McKenzie, I viewed the display cases as "bodies" and deliberately placed only one piece in each.

My first curatorial experience on an international exhibition was ***Stuff: Ingenuity and Critique*** in 2004, with Danish co-curator Louise Campbell. The exhibition was part of Harbourfront Centre's ***SUPERDANISH*** contemporary Danish art festival and featured ceramics, jewellery, furniture, textiles, glass and fashion. The exhibition reflected the strong design approach prevalent in Danish craft, as well as a taste for minimal decoration. Black and yellow were chosen as the exhibition's signature colours, reflecting certain lowbrow "no name" brands in both countries, and poking fun at the seriousness with which fine craft tends to be exhibited. Placement and space were also carefully considered. Most of the objects (clay, glass) were presented at table height and exposed rather than behind glass to give them domestic scale. Fashion pieces were the most challenging in this regard since fashion, like jewellery, is best displayed on the body. Rather than suspending garments on hangers, I borrowed an installation technique from the Textile Museum of Canada and

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secured pieces to a wall with rare-earth magnets, thereby giving the clothing a semblance of "character."

For the recent exhibition, ***Massclusivity: New models of viable design and craft collaborations in the developing world***, I worked with co-curator Patty Johnson, We were interested in presenting a growing aspect of contemporary craft and design practice in which craftspeople and designers use their skills and expertise to connect with the global craft community. The exhibition consisted of furniture, ceramics, textiles and baskets that were, in Johnson's words, "grounded in the physical world . . . and tied to a place and its manufacturing traditions, making it more specifically representative of the people who make it." Once again, we displayed things on a domestic scale.

Giving an exhibition a clear concept is key. When conceiving an exhibition, alone or with a co-curator, I have a firm idea in mind and plan how best to present that idea, from exhibition format—group, solo, survey, invitational, single or mixed media—to the way things are displayed and contextualized.

American artist Ann Hamilton has said: "an object is a very difficult thing to make!" I agree. From conception to production, objects are indeed difficult to make, and the most important thing you can do as a curator is honour, showcase and reflect the vision and process with which any work has been conceived.

[1] Bruce Metcalf, "Contemporary Craft: A Brief Overview" in ***Exploring Contemporary Craft: History, Theory and Critical Writing***, (Toronto: Coach House Press and Harbourfront Centre Publishers, 1999), p. 13.

[2] Paul Greenhalgh, "Introduction: Craft in a Changing World," in ***The Persistence of Craft***, Paul Greenhalgh, ed. (London: A & C Black Ltd. Publishers, 2002), p. 1.

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The Heterotopia of the Craft Teacher or How I Became a *Wolpertinger*

By Paul McClure

IN HIS ESSAY for the catalogue OBJECToronto — Art Exposition of Contemporary Craft + Design, Gordon Thompson begins with the question, "Where is craft? Where do we find it now?" He goes on to answer: "It is in the city and in the country, in the professional studio and in the amateur's living room, it is in the gallery, at the craft fair, and at home, it is in the university, at the community college, and in the public schools, it is all over the internet." [1] Thompson's list could be further expanded to encompass the many places in which craft is taught and, by extension, the heterotopia of craft teachers.

> Craft seems to balk at a definitive proper place, because it is inherently "heterotopic"; that is, craft commits itself to a number of spaces simultaneously. [2]
>
> — Gordon Thompson

Thompson uses "heterotopic" in the ecological sense, meaning: "occurring in a number of different habitats." A ***wolpertinger*** [3] is the ultimate heterotopic creature. Like the ***wolpertinger***, the craft teacher also has many habitats including schools, colleges and universities; studios and workplaces; publications and galleries; museums and expositions.

This brief look at my own career as a craft teacher describes how, in the process of teaching, I became a ***wolpertinger*** — living out my life in various habitats, foraging, fending off predators, and imparting knowledge.

In the first habitat of schools, colleges and universities, I am an instructor and teacher. I show how to make, contextualize what is being made, identify individual strengths, provide entrepreneurial and employment skills, teach academic subjects, stay current, and perform administrative duties. I was trained within a system that values ideas, and learning through experimentation. I teach using this philosophy, but also instruct the repetition of a technical exercise until it is mastered. Although this may seem rigid, and even detrimental to the creative process, there is much to be said for creative expression derived from a thorough understanding of materials and techniques.

> Peter Dormer asserts "... instruction, as distinct from teaching, is non-negotiable. Instruction is based on the principle that there is a right and a wrong way of doing things .... Teaching is arguably a broader activity than instruction because teaching is less determined by specific vocations." [4]

As a teacher, I must define and enforce craft's limitations, must teach that there are specific techniques, processes, materials and functions and that craft is distinct from art. Craft encompasses the decorative, the functional, the accessory, the gift and the ritual object. Craft has its own histories and theory.

> While craft certainly can embody meaning, and occasionally is recognized by the art world for doing so, craft cannot be anything at all. Craft is limited. [5]
>
> — Bruce Metcalf

Craft can be many things, and teachers must be conscious of a student's strengths. Not all students will, or should, produce contemporary craft. Teaching thus also means weeding, although there is pressure from administrators to keep "bums in seats." It is thus critical to direct students to the appropriate craft discipline.

> Never try to teach a rabbit to sing. It wastes your time, and it annoys the rabbit.
>
> — Anonymous

An increasing number of craft students need and want to be entrepreneurs. Teachers must thus provide some basic business skills, and must maintain close industry ties to help students find employment. A lack of instruction in craft theory

or history means that instructors must fill this role. I was asked, for example, to develop a History of Jewellery course. Despite severe time limitations, a broad topic (5,000 years), and students' diverse background knowledge, the course at least helps to impart some knowledge of craft history.

> It is only by implementing academic rigour in the craft syllabus that students will be able to articulate and expound upon theoretical craft issues. Then they can debunk the soppy, romantic images of craftspeople . . .[6]
>
> — Alexandra Palmer

In any field, a professional must devote time to professional development. In my own field, new technologies and materials include CAD/CAM, laser welding and new alloys, and all of us use new communications tools such as websites and blogs. Above all, a craft teacher needs to continue making — both to stay active in the field, and to demonstrate his/her relevance to students.

Teachers also have administrative responsibilities. Enrolment is crucial to the viability of any craft program, and faculty are often called upon to recruit students. Most Canadian craft programs would not survive without faculty promotion and maintaining a professional network within both the educational world and the craft industry is essential. Currently a craft instructor in Canada teaches techniques, processes, material properties, design and drawing skills, entrepreneurial skills, professional practices, history and theory. That's a lot of activities within only *one* of the *wolpertinger's* habitats!

In studios and workplaces, I am a mentor and/or employer who teaches by example, outside a formal environment. A mentor teaches by practising the craft, exhibiting regularly, running a business, being a juror, an advisor, and offering workshops and lectures. My own mentors taught me everything from research skills and maintaining international contacts, to developing a personal visual language and promoting my work. Mentorship remains the most critical way in which craft is taught.

I am also a writer and provide critical analysis of craft for magazines, journals, exhibition catalogues, books and websites as do an increasing number of practising craftspeople and teachers in Canada.

Within galleries, museums and expositions, societies and councils, I am the ambassador with a role to promote, curate, sell, organize, provide exposure, public outreach and build a community. Interpreting craft to the public is essential in today's craft world. Craft

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teachers inhabit galleries, museums and craft exhibitions as ambassadors. They strengthen the profile of contemporary craft and encourage public appreciation and awareness. Without this critical aspect, craft would have no market, and therefore no viability.

Craft is taught firstly to meet the demand among youth to learn craft skills and become craftspeople. Teachers and mentors meet this demand. Secondly, craft education meets the need to develop an informed and appreciative market to ensure the relevancy and survival of contemporary craft. Writers, curators, gallery owners and ambassadors fill this need. Of course, to do all this you need specialists. The reality of Canada's contemporary craft world, however, is that there are not enough people to support such specialization. Perhaps in time, if we continue to educate and attract people into the field, there will be more specialists, each working in only one of the habitats I have described. In the meantime, however, we all need to be *wolpertingers*!

[1] Gordon Thompson, "Placing Craft", in OBJECToronto catalogue, 2007.

[2] Ibid.

[3] The *wolpertinger* was introduced to me by Professor Otto Künzli. A *wolpertinger* is a Bavarian traditional craft object. It is a mythical creature with the body parts of various animals — generally wings, antlers and fangs. Another metaphor Künzli used was the Swiss Army knife: an object with many functions at the same time without specialising in any one particular function.

[4] Peter Dormer, ed., *The Culture of Craft* (Manchester University Press, 1997, p. 220.

[5] Bruce Metcalf, "Craft and art, culture and biology" in *The Culture of Craft* (Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 72.

[6] Alexandra Palmer, "Craft Theory and Education" in *Exploring Contemporary Craft* (Toronto: Coach House Books and Harbourfront Centre, 2002), p. 60.

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